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Challenging Old Fogysm

by Donna W. Jorgensen

At the turn of the 20th century, Professor Arthur O. Norton of Harvard University wrote about the professional growth needs of secondary teachers. He said, “What the teacher needs is continuous growth, prolonged efficiency, a long period of plasticity, and expansion of power...” (136). Further, he said that teachers “. . .fossilize at any age...” and he further states, “Professor James caps the climax by saying that old fogysm sets in in most people at twenty-five.” (136). That is a startling statement when applied to the teaching profession because it seemed to suggest that teachers hit their peak in the classroom quite early and then become fossils, old fogies, who should have additional professional training but do not. Well, you say, that was 108 years ago; things have surely changed since then! What if that is not the case? Today’s teachers face many challenges, and perhaps it is still quite easy to rely on pedagogical methods that have past their prime as they struggle to prepare learners for a place in our 21st century world. Sadly, school hasn’t changed a lot in the past century, and part of that is because teachers fossilize, and the result is that their teaching becomes stale and rote and dated. Teaching lacks any kind of spark because teachers find themselves placing importance on all the wrong things. Their creativity is stifled in the name of test preparation, and their personal style can be buried. It is time to challenge “old fogysm.” It is time to embrace the spirit of growth and change. If teachers do not, if they stay on the same path, using the same methods, they should not be surprised by children’s disinclination to learn.

The truth is that teachers have it in their power to change the world. They have the power to awaken the joy of learning in even the most disinterested students. They have the power to contribute to a citizenry who are knowledgeable, involved, and caring. They have the power, but they must fight that the tendency to dig out the same old lessons on the same old subject matter year after year, sometimes because they believe students don’t actually care about either the content or the way it is taught. Sometimes, teachers are victims, too, of a movement to standardization that seems to stifle opportunities to be creative in the classroom. These are the teachers who have settled in to lives of old fogysm; these are the teachers who need to have their worlds shaken up and reinvented. Orit Schwarz-Franco tells us that we need to heed to advice of Josef Schwab in understanding the work of teachers. Teaching “is constantly dynamic, and it demands creativity...” (994). Teachers do have autonomy and the power to transform teaching and learning, but they must accept the challenge. Teachers may believe that they have few or no choices about what goes on in their classrooms, so they simply keep doing what they have always done. This is counter-productive, and pesky old fogysm has found an entry point.

Paulo Freire suggested that teachers must engage students in learning that empowers students to participate and share in the pedagogy. Learning is much, much more than what old fogysm applauds: the depositing of information (knowledge) into waiting receptacles (students) rather than offering situations in which knowledge evolves as students actively participate in igniting the learning spark (Schwarz-Franco). Schwarz-Franco further states, “...I suggest that autonomous and transformative teaching are both dependent on the idea that knowledge is dynamically produced in class and that teaching is a creative undertaking” (p. 995). This is the heart of what teaching and learning can and ought to be. Today’s students need knowledge of the past and past events; there can be no doubt that they need a foundation. At the same time, they need to see that learning is not static any more than the world we live in stands still without change. Change is important; change is scary; change is necessary. Change challenges our set ways, and that can be uncomfortable.

Challenging old fogysm does not mean that every teacher must become the sort of super-hero teachers often portrayed in movies. In some of these movies, teachers are portrayed as invincible,

always available, brave people with limitless energy and enthusiasm, interested in only what is best for their students, always. “This hero may be thought of as a source of inspiration and motivation for young teachers. On an elusive level, however, such films send the teacher a frightening message, saying that if you are not a ‘super-man,’ you better accept the norms of the school...” (1001). That belief that one cannot be a superhero can result in another entry point for old fogysm. Movie teachers should inspire us to find ways to challenge this in our own classrooms. We know that superheroes are fiction; we also know that teachers do heroic things every day in many ways. Wanting to be inspired and wanting to grow professionally are not enough. Teachers must step up and find their path in a constantly changing and miraculous world of educational opportunity.

Pearls of wisdom are often dropped into conversations, particularly those connected with professional development. Often they are left to take seed and grow. Sometimes, what is masquerading as wisdom appears more like a burr, an irritant, that left unattended would fester. One of these pearls of wisdom is that “opportunity knocks but once...” Hearing it time and again, one might wonder whether it knocks once each day or week or month or year. Does it mean that opportunity knocks only once in each of the areas of one’s life? Is it possible that any person would be given only one opportunity to define a lifetime? Every moment of every day, every person whom we meet, every adventure we have is opportunity knocking...once in the moment, but certainly not once only.

Appreciating opportunity is inspirational. In each experience in the classroom and in each student whose path has crossed that of a teacher, there is an opportunity to be inspired and to be inspirational. Through the beauty of language, even for those who struggle to find the “right” words to complete a task, inspiration flows outward and then back. To share, through the words of others, possibility, to see inspiration dawn in the eyes of a student, to nurture discovery—these are inspiration, and in these inspirations we challenge old fogysm. In order to keep the challenge alive, there must be a bit of idealist in each of us. The old fogy would say that it is better to be realistic, to accept that this is the way things are and that we have little chance to change them. Idealists refuse to accept that we cannot change things or that we cannot meet and overcome challenges. Idealists make us believe that anything is possible. Idealists know that they and their students can change the world. In 1943, music teacher Lillian McCune looked at the reality of a world torn by war. She suggested that we look for those moments that make us want to be better than we have been before. McCune wants to make music part of every student’s world, believing that finding the song the world needs to hear can make a difference (58). McCune may have been an idealist, but she believed that, in emergencies, inspiration comes from the songs of our lives. In 1943, World War II was the emergency; in 2017, there continue to be real political and global emergencies. Can we find the songs to help us challenge the status quo of educational experiences? Can we create music that will compel us to embrace change? Perhaps it sounds idealistic, but what if we each can find a way to sing songs of change and growth and justice and hope? If we do, there is every reason to believe that our classrooms will become dynamic and innovative. Old fogysm will be banished.

Marlow Ediger suggests that there are bits of wisdom from which we can all draw inspiration. Among them, he cites Dr. Herman Harrel Horne who, in 1931, put forth some things he saw as truths about teachers. He said,

Blessed are you teachers: For you have found your work.
Blessed are you teachers: For you are freed from the temptation to put your trust in money.
Blessed are you teachers: For yours is the kingdom of children.
Blessed are you teachers: For your associates are among the world’s best.
Blessed are you teachers: For your work is constantly realizing your selfhood.
Blessed are you teachers: For you may ‘allure to bright worlds’ of truth and live and learn the way.

Blessed are you teachers: For you have kinship with the great sharing souls of all mankind.
(Ediger 2)

If we accept these blessings, we must recognize that we are challenged to rid ourselves and our classrooms of old fogyism. We have work to do.

Hold the hand of child grasping a pencil to form the letters of his first word on paper; watch the intense concentration on the face of an adolescent struggling to make sense of a passage in a beloved book; cry with the writer who has found exactly the right word to convey an emotion; comfort the student who struggles to master a formula for writing that will help him to reach “proficiency” on an assessment that says nothing about who he is as a person or as a learner. Each is an opportunity to be inspired and to inspire. The smallest successes inspire greatness in a child. The struggles inspire determination. The discovery inspires joy. None of it is easy, but opportunity presents itself time and again to inspire us to continue to do what we do...we teach in order that others may also find inspiration. Inspiration grows from opportunity... In the face of a dynamic, creative, motivated, caring teacher who is committed to professional growth, old fogyism cannot survive.

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